

Teaching for Life? Midlife narratives from female classroom teachers who considered leaving the profession.

Helen Cooper and Kate Mackenzie Davey.

Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, Malet St WC1E 7HX UK.

Phone +44 (0)207 631 6757

Fax +44 (0) 20 7631 6750

Email: k.mackenzie-davey@bbk.ac.uk

Final version published as

Cooper, H. & Mackenzie Davey, K. (2011) Teaching for Life? Midlife narratives from female classroom teachers who have considered leaving the profession. **British Journal of Guidance and Counselling**. **39**(1) 83-102.

Teaching for Life? Midlife narratives from female classroom teachers who considered leaving the profession.

Abstract

Career decision making research has tended to focus on career change as a discrete event and explore the experiences of those who move. Not all of those who consider changing career do so and their decisions also have longer term effects. Nine women teachers who had considered changing occupation, but remained teaching at midlife were interviewed. Narrative plotlines of their accounts ranged from reconciliation to ongoing disaffection. Thematic analysis identified factors associated with occupational embeddedness in understanding why these women stayed in teaching. This study explored longer-term decision-making processes and the potential for embedding issues to constrain occupational mobility. Implications for career counselling focus on the needs of those who feel unable to leave demanding occupations.

Key words: occupational embeddedness; teaching; narrative plotlines; career decisions; women's careers.

Introduction

The decision to change occupation is complex. Studies have examined what leads individuals to consider occupation change (Donahue, 2006) and the experiences of those who change occupation (e.g. Reich & Kaarst-Brown, 1999; Young & Rodgers, 1997) but much of this work has tended to treat consideration of occupation change as a discrete event in the career. However, Steele (2002) has suggested that such decision-making is part of a longer term process and there is increasing recognition of the need to understand not only what leads to turnover, but also what keeps individuals in their occupation (Ng & Feldman, 2007). This study aimed to move beyond work on occupational mobility, to explore instead the experience of staying on.

Teaching offers many people, especially women, a rewarding, flexible 'job-for-life' (Wilkins & Head, 2002). However, it can be a difficult and challenging job and many teachers consider changing occupation at some stage in their career (Smithers & Robinson, 2003). This study focused on the experiences of female teachers who had considered leaving the profession, but remained teaching at midlife. A narrative approach was used both to map their thoughts of leaving over the course of the career span (Gergen & Gergen, 1986) and to explore their experiences of withdrawal and embeddedness (Ng & Feldman, 2007). Through these qualitative analyses, career counsellors, education managers and teachers themselves may develop a richer understanding of what keeps teachers in the classroom and the ways they cope with a demanding profession in mid-career.

Teaching as a career for women

The teaching profession is highly gendered with a predominantly female workforce (GTC, 2007). The processes underpinning this are complex, but include perceptions of teaching as an 'appropriate' career for women (Acker, 1989) which relate to the nurturing and caring elements of the teaching role (Sharf, 2006). The availability of flexible working practices and school holidays can also make this a family-friendly career, a key factor in attracting female mid-career changers into the profession (Richardson & Watt, 2005). Women make greater use of contractual flexibility, with many more working on a part-time and supply basis than their male colleagues (GTC, 2007). Relatively few women progress into senior management roles

though. Reasons may include the impact of childcare responsibilities for many women and a preference for classroom teaching (Hutchings, 2006). The profession potentially offers women a vocationally satisfying and family-friendly career. In narrative terms, such a positive experience would form a progressive occupational narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

In recent years, levels of satisfaction have fallen amongst teachers linked to profound changes in their profession. Key factors include 'badly behaved pupils, an excessive workload and too many government initiatives' (Smithers & Robinson, 2003). Teachers are vulnerable to low morale and stress-related problems (Tatar, 2009) at any stage of their professional career. Newly qualified staff, for example, may struggle with the realities of life in the classroom (Kinnunen & Sale, 1994), while experienced teachers may have difficulties coping with the demands of teaching and reaching a career plateau as they become older (Wilkins et al, 2004). Combined with other work, family and personal circumstances, low morale may lead some to think about changing occupation. A study for the General Teaching Council reported that one-third of teachers in England had considered leaving state school teaching (MORI, 2003). Whilst some had looked at moving into the independent sector, or teaching abroad, others reported plans to leave the profession and move into other occupations. In narrative terms, this contrasting perspective might lead to a regressive account of the teaching career (Gergen and Gergen, 1986).

Occupation change processes

Research focused on understanding what drives individuals to consider leaving an occupation has identified low levels of occupational satisfaction, commitment or congruence (e.g. Blau, 2007; Doering & Rhodes, 1989; Kidd and Green, 2004; Oleski and Subich, 1996). However, there is increasing recognition that changing occupation can be more difficult than moving between jobs and organizations within the same occupation (Blau, 2007). Longstanding evidence suggests that factors such as a potential loss of income and family responsibilities may act as significant barriers to occupation change (Holmes & Cartwright, 1994; Neopolitan, 1980). Measures of constructs such as occupational satisfaction alone have often proved weak predictors of actual turnover (e.g. Donahue, 2006; Griffith et al; 2000). Low morale might lead teachers to consider leaving their profession, but may not be sufficient to make them go.

Some may settle instead for a less radical career transition such as changing schools or altering their contractual arrangements.

This highlights the potential complexity of both job and occupation turnover processes. Turnover theories have therefore offered different perspectives such as the development of a single withdrawal construct (Hom & Griffith, 1991), or the identification of different types of turnover decisions paths (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Such approaches continue to emphasise those events leading to turnover, however, and offer little insight into why teachers decide to stay in a demanding profession. Steele (2002) has drawn attention to the need for more studies to investigate longer-term turnover processes and Ng & Feldman (2007) have identified issues acting to keep individuals in their occupation. This current study was informed by both of these perspectives to take a career narrative at midlife and to explore experiences associated with considering staying in a career in the long term.

Occupational embeddedness

In their study of why people stay in jobs, Mitchell et al (2001) originally identified a set of forces with the potential to form ‘a net or web in which an individual can become stuck.’ From this Ng & Feldman (2007) developed the construct of occupational embeddedness which they define as ‘the totality of forces that keep people in their current occupations’. Embeddedness has three components: *fit*, *links* and *sacrifice*. In the teaching profession a strong occupational *fit* might be achieved if a teacher’s commitment to child development is matched by satisfaction in seeing her pupils achieve new tasks. Strong *links* include the potential for a network of teaching colleagues to promote opportunities within the profession. *Sacrifice* refers to critical losses a teacher may perceive arising from leaving the occupation, such as income or school holidays.

Embeddedness may be perceived either positively or negatively (Ng & Feldman, 2007) raising the possibility that teachers who have considered occupation change may view remaining in the profession in different ways. Some with childcare responsibilities, for example, may become reconciled to teaching, perceiving term-time working as a key benefit, while others may feel trapped by these arrangements. Occupational embeddedness therefore

offers a theoretical framework which may help us both to understand why female teachers might remain in their profession and to explore how they feel about doing so.

Temporal issues

Many approaches to modelling and investigating occupation change decisions have represented the decision as a one-off event. Rhodes and Doering (1983) developed a linear and staged model, for example, outlining how dissatisfaction with an occupation leads to a consideration of alternatives, subsequent job search activity and then potentially a change of occupation. Whilst such approaches recognise that this process occurs over a period of time, it is typically viewed as a discrete event in the career and does not explore further repercussions. Steele (2002) has highlighted how this perception has been reinforced by the predominance of cross-sectional approaches to investigating job and occupation turnover and identified a need for studies to investigate longer-term patterns in turnover processes.

Ng and Feldman (2007) have also identified the potential for temporal issues to underpin embedding processes. Using Super's (1957, 1980) framework of career stages they have outlined how occupational embeddedness might develop across the career span. At the 'maintenance' stage, for example, they highlight how career plateauing and parental responsibilities might promote occupational embeddedness. This link to plateauing suggests that classroom teachers at mid-career may be more embedded within the profession than those who have progressed to senior management positions. Similarly, having children might also promote embeddedness in teaching. At the career 'disengagement' stage lower confidence levels and a tendency to risk aversion may subsequently promote occupational embeddedness. Female teachers may therefore remain embedded in their profession even into later career stages.

The occupational embeddedness construct is a relatively new one, however, and little research has been undertaken to investigate its potential for understanding why individuals stay in an occupation. This study aimed to explore these issues by focusing on the experiences of a group of female classroom teachers who had considered leaving the profession, but were still teaching at midlife. It examined how they accounted for staying in teaching and also how they

felt about this experience. The study used a narrative method in order to capture the potentially complex and temporal nature of these issues.

Using a narrative approach

The value of narrative approaches to the career is widely recognised (Bujold, 2004) and used to explore temporal processes and the shape of biographical stories. A small number of studies, for example, have used a narrative approach to identify characteristic plotlines of gendered life stories (Lieblich et al, 1998) and typologies of parental influence on career development (Young et al, 1994). This study used Gergen and Gergen's (1986) narrative framework to identify and illustrate plotlines reflecting women's experiences of considering occupation change whilst remaining in the teaching profession. A teaching career plotline might be considered to decline or 'regress' if dissatisfaction with teaching was reported, associated with thoughts of occupation change and perhaps job search activity. Alternatively it might advance or 'progress' if teaching was constructed as the preferred career option and thoughts of occupation change ceased. The aim of using this approach was to construct graphical outlines of plot for each narrative and identify any characteristic types.

A narrative approach also allowed us to explore broad themes around decisions to stay in teaching and the ways in which they may recur over time (Lieblich et al, 1998). A potential theme, for example, was the financial concerns that might arise when considering changing occupation. Such a theme could then be analysed in the context of the 'sacrifice' component of the occupational embeddedness construct. Similarly other themes might be identified relating to 'fit' and 'links.' A particular aim of this analysis was therefore to see how such themes might illustrate the positive and negative aspects of occupational embeddedness.

Method

Nine female class room teachers were selected for the study using snowball sampling to identify those who had considered changing occupation at least once. The participants were in their 40s and 50s and either had no childcare responsibilities, or had children who were at least of school age. They had between 15-30 years teaching experience. They fulfilled Bardwick's (1980) criteria of being at a midlife.

Each participant was interviewed and asked a series of key 'generative narrative questions' (Flick, 1998). The aim was to encourage a narrative account of the teaching career - both up to the present midlife stage and into a constructed career future. Women were asked why they had decided to go into teaching. They subsequently described their first experience of considering occupation change and were questioned about why they then remained in teaching at that stage. Finally, they were asked if they had considered changing occupation at any time since and if they planned to continue in the teaching profession. Each interview lasted up to two hours and was taped and transcribed for analysis.

All women were asked for their consent and the purpose and outcomes of the research explained to them. All names have been changed and excerpts screened to ensure anonymity. The interviewer was a professional career counsellor and made clear to the participants that in this case she was working purely as a researcher. However, all participants were offered the opportunity to meet another career counsellor for support after the interview.

Analysis

Timelines were drawn up to capture the chronological detail of each narrative such as length of time in teaching and key life events. Details of when occupation change was considered were also added, along with accounts of any associated job search activity. These timelines, in conjunction with the narrative accounts themselves, were analysed to identify forms of regressive, progressive or stable plot development. Polkinghorne's (1988) division of the narrative account into three stages - beginnings, middles and endings - was used as a framework for this analysis. So forms of plot development were examined firstly for the early stages of the teaching career, then at midlife and finally in the constructed career future. These were then combined to form a single graphical outline of plot development for each narrative.

In the second stage of analysis, key narrative themes were identified which accounted for remaining in teaching. Lieblich et al's (1998) 'holistic content' method was used to identify these based upon the volume of evidence within each narrative. If the potential loss of flexible working arrangements was expressed repeatedly across a narrative, for example, this would be considered a key theme. Such themes were also examined to see if they were consistently

employed across the career span, both prior to midlife and beyond. Comparisons were additionally made across the nine narratives to see if any common themes arose across some or all of the accounts. These themes were then considered in the context of the occupational embeddedness construct.

Results

Narrative plotlines constructed from the experience of staying in teaching

A plotline was mapped out in graphical form for each of the women's accounts and this process revealed a variety of distinct types of narrative plot (Figure 1). Two different forms of early plot development, for example, were identified. One group of narratives began by recalling some ambivalence about entering the teaching profession and regressed quickly into thoughts of occupation change (Figure 1a). In contrast, a second group described becoming a teacher as their preferred career option initially, and in these accounts occupation change was not considered until later into the career (Figure 1b).

Both groups of narratives went on to develop a progressive, regressive, or cyclical plotline. There was evidence from the progressive narratives, for example, of some subsequent reconciliation to remaining in the teaching profession. The regressive accounts described ongoing disaffection with teaching, however, whilst the cyclical narratives fluctuated between periods of temporary reconciliation to teaching and renewed instances of disaffection. These distinct stages and forms of narrative plot are illustrated here in more detail by drawing upon the women's individual stories.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Progressive narratives of reconciliation

Tessa originally planned to become a bilingual secretary, but was unable to fund the required training. She then turned instead to teaching training for which a government grant was available. Despite this potentially inauspicious start, she qualified successfully as a secondary school teacher in modern languages and was quickly promoted to Head of Department. She

described how she then ‘panicked a bit’ at the prospect of teaching for the rest of her life. Three years into her teaching career, she therefore applied for jobs in the publishing sector. In spite of attending a number of interviews, however, her applications were unsuccessful and she decided to continue at that stage with teaching.

Tessa took a career break when she had children and then returned to the profession as a part-time classroom teacher. She hoped to remain working on this basis through to retirement, though felt under regular pressure from her head teacher to work full-time. Apart from having briefly considering lecturing at an FE college, however, her narrative went on to suggest that at the time of interview her thoughts of occupation change had ceased. She reflected instead upon how effectively teaching had accommodated her family commitments and that she found her work satisfying:

“This was the ideal job at the time for practical reasons. Because of holidays and hours and because, for part-time work, it’s well paid and it’s convenient. And also I do enjoy it, I like my subject, I like what I do.” (Tessa)

In contrast to Tessa’s early narrative, Catherine and Ellen both described a strong vocational wish to enter teaching and recalled enjoying the early years of their careers. They struggled to cope subsequently, however, with changes in the profession such as an increasing workload:

“I was every single night doing three or four hour’s preparation for A levels, GCSEs and marking and reports. Every night. It was just unbelievable.” (Catherine)

After ten years teaching PE in secondary schools, Catherine therefore investigated potential business ventures with friends. Ellen applied for administrative jobs after seven years as a primary school teacher and on another occasion was offered the opportunity to work with a friend setting-up a fitness agency. Both women opted instead to take up opportunities to become specialist teachers. Whilst Catherine went on to teach PE county-wide in primary schools, Ellen specialised as a Gifted and Talented primary teacher and they expressed great satisfaction with these roles:

“I’m so lucky. I think I’ve got the best teaching job I’ve ever had and I hope it continues for a lot of years.” (Ellen)

Both women voiced concern with the short-term nature of their contracts, associated with future funding uncertainties. They also indicated that they would only remain in teaching if they could retain their specialist roles:

“If I lost that, I’d be out of teaching like a shot.” (Catherine)

So whilst Tessa seemed reconciled to teaching for the remainder of her career, all be it, part time, Catherine and Ellen constructed narratives of conditional reconciliation, dependent upon their specialist teaching roles continuing.

Regressive narratives of ongoing disaffection

Alison entered the teaching profession as a stepping stone to fulfilling her wish to become an educational psychologist. She became disillusioned quickly, however, with how effective either career might be in bringing positive change to children’s lives. Within three years of working as a primary school teacher in a challenging inner city school, she therefore attempted to leave teaching. She retrained and worked for two years as a homeopath, supplementing this second career with supply teaching. She then returned to the profession as her main career after having children, because of the relatively higher income that she could earn as a teacher.

Alison’s narrative then became dominated by descriptions of negative teaching experiences through to midlife and ongoing attempts to leave a profession which she seemed to have never become reconciled to:

“It felt kind of soul destroying, because it’s not really what I wanted to be.” (Alison)

Her narrative concluded by outlining plans to leave her current part-time teaching post within the course of the following year. She expressed interest in working in a Family Liaison role between schools and families and described ongoing job search efforts in that area.

Unlike Alison, Robyn's account displayed strong vocational commitment in the early years of her primary school teaching career. Her narrative then regressed, however, into descriptions of how changes in government legislation had impacted negatively on her teaching role and mental health:

"Now it's a lot more top down. And there are certain criteria that you have to meet and assessment regimes that you have to follow. And I think that's where the fun started to dwindle really. And it became pressured, very pressured." (Robyn)

So Robyn left teaching temporarily after ten years to take a 'mental break' from work for several months and to undertake a creative writing course. She considered pursuing a writing career, but returned to part-time teaching for financial reasons. Her account concluded, however, by outlining plans to train as an Educational Psychologist the following academic year. Both Robyn and Alison's narratives therefore constructed career futures of ongoing intentions to leave teaching and move into different occupations.

Cyclical narratives of fluctuating reconciliation and disaffection

Hilary's account described 'following' her best friend into primary school teaching, but then struggling with the realities of the classroom. As a result she left teaching after a year to travel abroad and then returned to try working in a different school. In contrast, Jane enjoyed her work initially as a PE teacher, but these women's narratives then became similarly characterised by alternating accounts of positive and negative teaching experiences:

"The staff there were just lovely and the head teacher was lovely. And it was a really good experience." (Hilary)

"If you had a difficult class, you felt they were just throwing it back at you and weren't listening, weren't doing it properly. And you just felt thoroughly disillusioned." (Jane)

During periods of disaffection with teaching, Hilary considering work in occupations which would enable her to use her artistic skills and Jane effectively left secondary school teaching for periods of time to work as a self-employed tennis coach. She continued to do supply

teaching, however, to supplement her coaching income and then retrained to work on a full-time basis as a primary school teacher.

Two further narratives were also characterised by cyclical plotlines, but demonstrated more regular plot cycles. Gill reported a five year cycle when she would lose interest in her current job and apply for different posts, some in other occupations. She successfully applied for work as an Education Welfare Officer, for example, but turned this down in favour of a more local teaching position. Andrea identified stressful Ofsted inspections as a recurrent trigger to her considering leaving teaching and setting-up her own catering business. She even highlighted a daily cycle of fluctuating experiences:

“So you have good days and you have bad days. On a bad day, I would compose my resignation.” (Andrea)

In terms of potential career futures, these cyclical narratives all continued to fluctuate between thoughts of remaining in teaching, or leaving. They also highlighted additional concern about maintaining the stamina to cope with the demands of teaching and included thoughts of teaching subsequently on a part-time basis or taking early retirement. This group of narratives also expressed some continued interest in occupation change, but highlighted difficulties in identifying alternatives:

“I don’t know how people manage to move around. It would be interesting to know.” (Gill)

This suggested an ongoing lack of both career management skills and knowledge of viable opportunities in other occupations. These cyclical narratives therefore conveyed an overall sense of concern and uncertainty regarding career futures, and perhaps the more negative impact of embedding processes on the career.

Issues arising from the characteristic narrative plotlines

This process of identifying and examining narrative plotlines highlighted a number of issues. The two distinct forms of early plotline both regressed into considerations of occupation change prior to midlife, although this occurred earlier in the teaching career where

ambivalence had been expressed about entering the profession. Both groups of narratives then developed similarly into progressive, regressive, or cyclical plotlines. This suggests that both early ambivalence about teaching, and the contrasting experience of early vocational satisfaction, might equally evolve into a subsequent sense of reconciliation, ongoing disaffection, or some cyclical fluctuation between the two.

The stated reasons for considering leaving the profession ranged from boredom with teaching, to stress and disillusionment arising from the changing nature of this work. The narratives all identified some repeated thoughts and often active attempts to change occupation, even those characterised by a subsequently progressive plotline. This activity included applying for jobs, being offered work in other occupations and even undertaking second careers alongside teaching. Traditional turnover models suggest that such occupational dissatisfaction and evidence of active job search (e.g. Rhodes and Doering, 1983; Blau, 1993) might be expected to lead to occupation change. While all of the narratives in this study came back to teaching as the main career being undertaken at midlife, they did not necessarily see this as final.

Narrative themes relating to staying in teaching

To further understand this process, a second stage of analysis identified narrative themes associated with staying in teaching. These included occupational embeddedness themes relating to *fit*, *links* and *sacrifice* identified by Ng and Feldman (2007) and additional themes relating specifically to the midlife. The negative or positive construction of embeddedness was explored across narratives.

Themes relating to Fit

Although the narrative accounts expressed considerable dissatisfaction with many aspects of teaching, there was also evidence of some sustained satisfaction in working with children. This was the case for those reporting an initial vocational commitment to teaching, but also in those accounts which constructed ambivalence to entering the profession:

“What I discovered was that I really like working with children...and that’s really satisfying and interesting.” (Robyn)

These positive statements were often qualified, however, with expressions of dissatisfaction with related aspects of teaching:

“Teaching the A level, to be fair it was great, fantastic, I loved it. But it’s all the preparation you have to do before.” (Catherine)

Such accounts expressed concerns primarily about the broader context of changes in teaching policy over time. At the same time, the narratives all highlighted some ongoing satisfaction derived from teaching children. This *fit* may therefore have acted as an embedding force, in spite of discontent with many other aspects of the profession.

Themes relating to Links

Another theme concerned both the number and nature of relationships with teaching colleagues. Each narrative made regular reference to a variety of colleagues from both current and previous teaching roles. They also reported wide networks of colleagues, long-standing friendships and rewarding professional relationships:

“The head teacher was so supportive...and is still a friend of mine now.” (Hilary)

“I do like working with the team and they’re really lovely people at the school. We all get on really well, we have a lot of fun.” (Jane)

Additionally, the narratives highlighted how these *links* promoted the communication of teaching work opportunities. Jane and Tessa, for example, described how they heard about teaching roles via colleagues:

“And the head of languages was somebody I’d worked with years ago...and she said that they were really stuck for a sixth form teacher.” (Tessa)

“A lot of the people...you stay in touch. And they’d often say, ‘Oh, can you do a bit of supply?’ or ‘Do you fancy two days a week next term?’ And I’d say, ‘Yeah, okay then.’”
(Jane)

This highlighted how professional networks might act to embed individuals within their teaching career. In particular, they were a source of offers of further teaching work, sometimes as alternatives to occupation change opportunities. Longer-standing networks in particular may increasingly generate offers of further teaching work and reduce the possibility of changing occupation as the teaching career progresses.

Themes relating to Sacrifice

A predominant theme concerned the need to remain in teaching to achieve sufficient financial income. This arose repeatedly across every narrative, both for those women with children and those without family responsibilities:

“I loved being at home with the children. But it was for financial reasons, I was forced back...because my husband was unemployed and I had no choice.” (Hilary)

“We’d taken out a mortgage based on two salaries.” (Gill)

The teaching salary was constructed as fundamental to household finances because it represented either the main income, or a second income necessary to meet ongoing financial commitments. The entire sample group therefore identified a key role for themselves as wage earners, in line with research highlighting a decline in the traditional, male breadwinner model (Vogler et al, 2006). Teaching became perceived as both relatively better paid and offering greater job security when compared to other desired types of work:

“And then she told me what she’d pay me and I realised I could earn more teaching. So I pulled out.” (Ellen)

“It is secure and that’s the thing. I mean if you go to any mortgage company and say you’re a teacher they give you your money.” (Catherine)

An additional theme emerged across the accounts of those women with children. This concerned the potential loss of flexible working arrangements and school holidays which would arise through leaving teaching:

“It’s childcare again really, at the moment, that’s keeping me there. ‘Cos it’s convenient, it’s in the locale, I don’t have to worry.” (Alison)

These narratives therefore highlighted an additional role as primary carer, as well as wage earner, for those women managing childcare responsibilities (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997). The potential loss of a relatively secure income, as well as family-friendly contractual arrangements, was therefore constructed as a significant barrier to leaving teaching. As such, both narrative themes could be considered as embedding forces relating to the *sacrifice* component of the occupational embeddedness construct.

Midlife themes

Two narrative themes were additionally identified which related specifically to the midlife stage. The first concerned the potential for some loss of professional confidence and arose in a variety of ways. In particular, legislative changes in teaching and associated performance appraisal processes were associated with a sense of being tested and potentially found wanting. There was also recognition in the narratives of career plateauing and aging:

“You’re thinking, ‘Oh god, perhaps I’m not good enough. Perhaps I don’t know what I’m doing.” (Hilary)

“I think being over 40 I do feel...a bit kind of overlooked really.” (Alison)

Additionally, each of the narratives demonstrated a lack of agency in terms of the teaching career, revealed through concerns about taking on additional hours and the ongoing demands of parenting:

“I’m not sure whether I will be kind of brow beaten into going full-time.” (Tessa)

“I’m sure there’s never a time in your children’s lives when they don’t need you.” (Alison)

In the context of women’s adult development theory, a perceived lack of agency might have been anticipated as a theme prior to midlife, but was also evident in the construction of career futures too. This was in contrast to the optimism of some women’s development literature which predicts increasing agency from midlife as family commitments cease (Bardwick, 1980; Gallos, 1989). The narratives support, however, Ng and Feldman’s (2007) hypothesis that issues such as a loss of confidence and career plateauing might increasingly limit perceived career choices and further embed individuals in the later stages of their career.

Positive and negative embeddedness

Across the range of narrative themes identified in the accounts of teaching careers, there was some evidence of positive embeddedness in the teaching profession. This included ongoing satisfaction derived from working with children, as well as valued professional relationships. Some narratives expressed regret, however, at not having undertaken other career paths:

“I’d have loved to have done something with Art. I’d have liked to have gone to Art College and...I feel that’s a side of me that’s a bit kind of undiscovered I suppose.” (Hilary)

There was also evidence of being drawn back unwillingly into the teaching career. Tessa and Robyn, for example, described being ‘sucked’ into further teaching commitments, rather than choosing to take on additional work. The cyclical and regressive narratives additionally constructed negative and emotional perspectives of remaining in the profession:

“I think I probably will be stuck in teaching.” (Alison)

“I think I have no choice. And sometimes that gets me down because I do feel trapped.” (Hilary)

“What could I do? I’ve been institutionalised and I don’t know if I can escape.” (Gill)

A majority of the narratives therefore conveyed a sense of being negatively embedded in the profession, particularly in describing potential career futures. This was conveyed through the use of emotive language describing feelings of being 'stuck,' 'trapped' and 'institutionalised.' Such language suggests many of the women in this study found themselves caught unwillingly by the 'net' or 'web' of occupational embedding forces described by Mitchell et al (2001).

Discussion

The teaching career narratives in this study revealed the complexity of the process of considering occupation change, but remaining in this profession at midlife. Whilst some of the women found the early stages of this career satisfying, others considered changing occupation after only a year in the classroom. This demonstrated how thoughts of leaving teaching might arise at different stages across the career span. There was some evidence that low morale and disillusionment with changes in the profession had prompted thoughts of occupation change. Ultimately, the accounts showed how a range of embedding factors might act to constrain occupational mobility. The variety of characteristic plotlines identified in this study reflected the differing interplay between these variables, revealed through the women's individual stories.

These findings showed the complexity of decisions of occupational change. The women's narratives demonstrated how thoughts of occupation change may recur across the teaching span, rather than being a one-off event as some models have implied (e.g. Rhodes and Doering, 1983). Additionally, they highlighted the potential for occupation change to be postponed to a later life stage and revealed how the process of considering occupation change may evolve over many years. The findings identified repeated, active attempts to leave teaching. This included undertaking second careers alongside teaching, made possible through the availability of flexible working practices such as supply teaching. While traditional models of decision making might lead us to expect occupational change to result, these women were still teaching.

This study demonstrated the important role of embedding issues in occupational decision making processes. The narratives offered considerable evidence to support Ng and Feldman's

occupational embeddedness components of fit, links and sacrifice. This theoretical approach offered a useful framework in which to capture and examine career and life stage issues acting to embed individuals in their occupation. The narratives highlighted the potential for embeddedness to be perceived by individuals in different ways. Only one of the women appeared fully reconciled to remaining in teaching, and many of the accounts expressed perceptions of negative embeddedness. This suggests that whilst teaching might offer a relatively well paid, secure and family-friendly career for women, these features also have the potential to leave some teachers feeling trapped and powerless to leave a demanding profession.

Implications for practice

The findings from this study have implications for career counselling in the teaching profession. Teachers who seek support with changing occupation need to be given the opportunity to tell their teaching career story and explore how thoughts of leaving the profession have arisen across their career. This process may be assisted through the use of qualitative career assessment approaches such as the drawing of lifelines (McMahon & Patton, 2002) to help reveal characteristic plotlines. Career counsellors also need to understand the role of embedding issues and the reality of constraints on occupational mobility for many female teachers. They then need to consider how to support those clients who perceive themselves as negatively embedded in the teaching profession.

It may be possible to help some clients re-author their career narrative (Grant & Johnston, 2006), identifying and re-engaging with any positive aspects of their teaching career. Others may need assistance with developing career management skills and identifying career opportunities available to them. The need for job enrichment for classroom teachers has been recognised (Wilkins & Head, 2002), for example, but knowledge of and access to such initiatives were not evident in this study. Some clients may therefore need support with managing career plateauing issues and seeking continuing professional development solutions. Clients may also find it useful to consider less radical career transitions such as taking up flexible working options, changing teaching roles, or moving to a different school. Finally, some teachers may require additional support to manage stress and wellbeing issues arising from remaining in the profession.

Limitations and further research

The narrative approach employed in this study was valuable in capturing the detail, complexity and temporal nature of occupational decision-making for women in the teaching profession. The mapping of narrative plotlines and use of thematic analysis also helped to identify longer-term patterns in such decision-making processes and the important role of embedding issues. The narratives were constructed from a particular point in time, however, and from a midlife stage. The women's accounts therefore offered a current perspective on their teaching career, but also retrospective accounts of their past career and speculative accounts of career futures. This offered useful insights into the subjective understanding of career and the temporal nature of embedding processes. However, the constructed nature of the narratives and small sample size limit the external validity of this study (Atkinson, 1997) and suggests further research in this field is required.

Such research needs to address a number of issues. Firstly, although this study focused on teaching careers, its results may have a wider application to individuals working in other professions. Larger scale studies might therefore compare longitudinal patterns of occupation change considerations across other occupations and gender groups. Additionally, Ng & Feldman (2007) have suggested that the occupational embeddedness construct may be represented by non-affective measures such as the number of 'links'. The findings from this study suggest, however, that further work needs to look beyond simply counting links and assess the quality and longevity of professional and social networks. Finally, Kidd (2004) has argued for a better understanding of the role of emotion in career contexts. This study revealed emotive responses to both occupation change considerations and long-term embeddedness in a demanding career, which future models and research into embedding processes need to address.

REFERENCES

- Acker, S. (1989). Rethinking teachers' careers. In S. Acker (ed.) *Teachers, Gender and Careers* (pp. 7-20). London: Falmer Press.
- Atkinson, P. (1997). Narrative turn or blind alley? *Qualitative Health Research*, **7**, 325-344.
- Bardwick, J. (1980). The seasons of a woman's life. In D. McGuigan (ed.) *Women's Lives: New Theory, Research and Policy*. Ann Arbor: Michigan.
- Blau, G. (1993). Further exploring the relationship between job search and voluntary individual turnover. *Personnel Psychology*. **46** 313-330
- Blau, G. (1994). Testing a Two-Dimensional Measure of a Job Search Behaviour. *Organizational Behaviour & Human Decision Processes*, **59** (2), 288-312.
- Blau, G. (2007). Does a corresponding set of variables for explaining voluntary organizational turnover transfer to explaining voluntary occupational turnover? *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **70**(1), 135-148.
- Doering, M.M. & Rhodes, S.R. (1989). Changing Careers - A Qualitative Study. *Career Development Quarterly*, **37**(4), 316-333.
- Donahue, R. (2006). Person-environment congruence in relation to career change and career persistence. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **68**(3), 504-515.
- Flick, U. (1998). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications: London.
- Forrester, G. (2005). All in a day's work: primary teachers 'performing' and 'caring.' *Gender and Education*, **17**(3), 271-287.

Gallos, J.V. (1989). Exploring women's development: implications for career theory, practice and research. In M.B. Arthur, D.T Hall and B.S.Lawrence (eds.) *Handbook of Career Theory*. CUP: Cambridge.

Gergen, K.J. & Gergen, M.M. (1986). Narrative form and the construction of psychological science. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.) *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.

GTC (2006). *Annual Digest of Statistics – Registered Teacher Profiles 2005/2006*. General Teaching Council for England: London.

Grant, E.M. and Johnston, J.A. (2006). Career Narratives. In McMahon, M. and Patton, W. (eds.) *Career Counselling: Constructivist Approaches*. Routledge: London.

Holmes, T. & Cartwright, S. (1994). *Mid-Career Change - The Ingredients for Success*. *Employee Relations*, **16** (7), 58-72.

Hom, P. & Griffeth, R. (1991). Structural equations modelling test of a turnover theory: Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **76**, 350-366.

Hutchings, M., Smart, S., James, K. & Williams, K. (2006). *General Teaching Council for England Survey of Teachers 2006*. London: Institute for Policy Studies in Education, London Metropolitan University.

Kidd, J.M. (2004). Emotion in career contexts: challenges for theory and research. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **64**, 441-454.

Kidd, J.M. & Green, F. (2006) The careers of research scientists – Predictors of three dimensions of career commitment and intention to leave science. *Personnel Review*, **35**, (3), 229-251.

Kinnunen, U. & Salo, K. (1994). Teacher Stress – An 8-year follow-up study on teachers work, stress and health. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, **7** (4), 319-337.

Lee, K., Carswell, J.J. & Allen, N.J. (2000). A meta-analytic review of occupational commitment: Relations with person- and work-related variables. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **85**, (5), 799-811.

Lee, T.W. & Mitchell, T.R. (1994). An alternative approach: The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover. *Academy of Management Review*, **1**, 51-89.

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Maschiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative Research: reading, analysis and interpretation*. SAGE :Thousand Oaks, CA.

McMahon, M. and Patton, W. (2002). Using qualitative assessment in career counselling. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, **2**, 51-66.

Mitchell, T.R., Holtom, B.C., Lee, T.W., Sablinski, C.J., & Erez, M. (2001). Why people stay: using organizational embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, **44**, 1102-1121

Mobley, W. (1977). Intermediate linkages in the relationship between job satisfaction and employee turnover. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **62**, 237-240.

MORI (2003). *Teachers on Teaching: A Survey of the Teaching Profession* (MORI Report No. J16189). MORI: London.

Ng, T.W.H. & Feldman, D.C. (2007). Organizational embeddedness and occupational embeddedness across career stages. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **70**, 336-351.

Neopolitan, J. (1980). Occupational change in mid-career; an exploratory investigation. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **16**, 212-225.

Oleski, D. & Subich, L.M. (1996). Congruence and career change in employed adults. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **49**, 221-229.

Polkinghorne, D. (1988). *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. State University of New York Press: Albany, NY.

Rhodes, S.R. & Doering, M.(1983). An Integrated Model of Career Change. *Academy of Management Review*, **8(4)**, 631-639.

Rhodes, S.R. & Doering, M.(1993). Intention to Change Careers – Determinants and Process. *Career Development Quarterly*, **42 (1)**, 76-92.

Richardson, P.W. & Watt, H.M.G. (2005). ‘I’ve decided to become a teacher’; Influences on career change. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, **21 (5)**, 475-489

Siniscalco, M. T. (2002). *A Statistical Profile of the Teaching Profession*, Paris: UNESCO.

Smith, S. (1996). Uncovering key aspects of experience: the use of in-depth interviews in a study of women returners to education. In E.S. Lyon and J. Busfield (eds.) *Methodological Imaginations*. Houndmills: Macmillan.

Smithers, A. & Robinson, P. (2003). *Factors affecting teacher’s decisions to leave the profession*. (DfES Research Report 430). DfES: London.

Steel, R.P. (2002). Turnover Theory at the Empirical Interface: Problems of Fit and Function. *Academy of Management Review*, **27, (3)**, 346-360.

Super, D.E. (1957). *The Psychology of Careers*. Harper and Row: New York.

Super, D.E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, **16**, 282-98.

Tatar, M. (2009). Teachers turning for help to school counsellors and colleagues: Toward a mapping of relevant predictors. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, **37 (2)**, 107-127.

Vogler, C., Brockmann, M. & Wiggins, R.D. (2006). Intimate relationships and changing patterns of money management at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *British Journal of Sociology*, **57**(3), 455-482.

Wilkins, R. & Head, M. (2002). *How to Retain and Motivate Experienced Teachers: A research report sponsored by SAGA and supported by the National Union of Teachers*. Centre for Education Leadership and School Improvement: Canterbury.

Wilkins, R., Head, M., Taylor, M. & Keaveny, B. (2004). *Supporting and Utilising the Experience and Expertise of Older Teachers*. Centre for Education Leadership and School Improvement: Canterbury.

Young, R. A., Friesen, J.D. & Borycki, B. et al. (1994). Narrative structure and parental influence in career development. *Journal of Adolescence*, **17**, 173-191.